

Overview of ser vs. estar

One of the most stressful parts of learning Spanish for many language learners, other than the [subjunctive](#) and [para vs. por](#), is knowing the difference between ser and estar. But it doesn't have to be stressful! While both of these verbs mean "to be" and are used all the time in daily communication, the following simple rules should help you to differentiate between the two.

Uses of Ser

General Ser Rule

Ser is used to classify and identify permanent or lasting attributes. If the general rule isn't specific enough for you, think of the acronym **DOCTOR**, which stands for **D**escription, **O**ccupation, **C**haracteristic, **T**ime, **O**origin, and **R**elationship.

1. Description

For description, think of what you would say if someone asked you "What's he like?" These are the essential qualities that define a person and probably won't change. They can be a name or a physical description.

- Yo **soy** Raúl. (*I **am** Raúl.*)
- Yo **soy** alta, morena, y delgada. (*I **am** tall, dark-skinned, and thin.*)

2. Occupation

Occupations are seen as life-long careers and are therefore seen as more "permanent" than many people would think in the United States.

- **Soy** profesora del español. (*I **am** a Spanish teacher.*)
- Ellos **son** estudiantes. (*They **are** students.*)
- Mi padre **era** jardinero. (*My father **was** a gardener.*)

No Indefinite Articles

Notice that the indefinite articles **un**, **una**, **unos**, and **unas** are **omitted** when describing an occupation after the verb ser.

3. Characteristic

Characteristics are personality descriptions of a person. These would probably be the second thing you say to "What's he like?"

- Amalia **es** inteligente, atrevida, y amable. (*Amalia **is** inteligente, daring, and friendly.*)
- Mi esposo **es** romántico y cariñoso. (*My husband **is** romantic and caring.*)

4. Time

Time includes days, dates, and hours. For hours, use *es* for one o'clock and *son* for all other hours.

- Hoy **es** miércoles. (*Today **is** Wednesday.*)
- Ayer **fue** mi cumpleaños. (*Yesterday **was** my birthday.*)
- Ahora **es** la una y media. (*Right now **it's** one thirty.*)
- **Son** las cinco y veinticinco. (***It's** five twenty five.*)

5. Origin

As the place a person is from or the material something is made from is not going to change we use *ser* for origin.

- Celia **es** de España. (*Celia **is** from Spain.*)
- Adela **es** peruana. (*Adela **is** Peruvian.*)
- Mi anillo **es** de oro. (*My ring **is** gold.*)

6. Relationship

Even after someone dies or someone breaks up, relationships are described using *ser*.

Religion is a Relationship

Also, since religion is considered a relationship with a higher power, religions are also described using *ser*.

- Lynne **es** mi madre. (*Lynne **is** my mother.*)
- Marcos **es** mi ex-novio. (*Marcos **is** my ex-boyfriend.*)
- Andrés **es** católico. (*Andrés **is** Catholic.*)

Uses of Estar

General Estar Rule

Estar is used to indicate temporary states and locations. If the general rule doesn't suffice, think of the acronym **PLACE**, which stands for **P**osition, **L**ocation, **A**ction, **C**ondition, and **E**motion.

1. Position

Position is the physical position or posture a person or thing is in.

- Mi abuela **está** sentada. (*My grandmother **is** sitting down/seated.*)
- Yo **estaba** acostada cuando me llamaste. (*I **was** lying down when you called me.*)

2. Location

The location of someone or something describes where it is permanently, temporarily, actually, or conceptually.

- El baño **está** a la derecha de la sala. (*The bathroom **is** to the right of the living room.*)
- **Estamos** en el café ahora y estaremos en el cine en 20 minutos. (*We **are** at the café right now and we **will be** at the movie theatre in 20 minutes.*)
- Mi abuelo **está** en la luna. (*My grandfather **is** out of it/lost.*)

Exception for Parties

This is a big one: The **location of an event or party is described using SER**. Not ESTAR!

- La fiesta **es** en mi casa. (*The party is at my house.*)

3. Action

Estar is used to describe an ongoing action using the present progressive tense.

- **Estoy** lavando los platos sucios. (*I **am** washing the dirty dishes.*)
- **Estamos** leyendo los periódicos. (*We **are** reading the newspapers.*)
- Mi bisabuelo **está** muerto. (*My great-grandfather **is** dead.*)

Death is Ongoing Action

In Spanish, death is seen as an ongoing action, not a permanent state, thus you use the verb estar and not ser.

4. Condition

Physical and mental conditions are described using *estar*.

- **Estoy** tan cansada esta mañana. (*I **am** so tired this morning.*)
- Mis niños **están** enfermos hoy. (*My children **are** sick today.*)
- Mi madre **está** un poco loca. (*My mother **is** (acting) a little crazy.*)

5. Emotion

How a person is feeling at a certain moment is described using *estar*.

- **Estoy** triste. (*I **am** sad.*)
- Ella **está** contenta porque recibió unas flores de su novio. (*She **is** happy because she received some flowers from her boyfriend.*)

Meaning Changes With Ser and Estar

There are some words that can be used with both *ser* and *estar*, but take on different meanings depending on the verb. Below you will find a chart with both forms and their meanings in English.

Same Adjective, Different Meaning

Ser		Estar	
ser aburrido	<i>to be boring</i>	estar aburrido	<i>to be bored</i>
ser bueno	<i>to be good</i>	estar bueno	<i>to be tasty/attractive</i>
ser cansado	<i>to be a tiring person</i>	estar cansado	<i>to be tired</i>
ser grave	<i>to be serious</i>	estar grave	<i>to be seriously ill</i>
ser listo	<i>to be clever</i>	estar listo	<i>to be ready</i>
ser malo	<i>to be bad</i>	estar malo	<i>to be ill</i>
ser orgulloso	<i>to be conceited or vain</i>	estar orgulloso	<i>to be proud</i>
ser moreno	<i>to be dark-skinned</i>	estar moreno	<i>to be tanned</i>
ser pálido	<i>to be pale skinned</i>	estar pálido	<i>to be pale</i>
ser pesado	<i>to be heavy</i>	estar pesado	<i>to be tiresome</i>
ser rico	<i>to be rich</i>	estar rico	<i>to be tasty</i>
ser seguro	<i>to be safe</i>	estar seguro	<i>to be certain</i>
ser verde	<i>to be green</i>	estar verde	<i>to be unripe</i>
ser viejo	<i>to be old</i>	estar viejo	<i>to look old</i>
ser vivo	<i>to be sharp</i>	estar vivo	<i>to be alive</i>

Exercises

1) Pick the correct conjugated form of ser or estar for each phrase and list the reason for why you chose your answer.

Example: (Soy/Estoy) bajo y perezoso. -> Soy - description and characteristic

1. La cena (es/está) en la mesa.
2. (Son/Están) las siete de la mañana.
3. Yo (soy/estoy) muy cansado. Tengo muchos exámenes mañana.
4. Mi madre (es/está) llamandome. Tengo que irme.
5. ¿De dónde (es/está) la Srta. Peris-Peris?
6. Ángela (es/está) policía en Nueva York.
7. Ahora (somos/estamos) en la oficina.
8. Mi ex-novio todavía (es/está) enojado.
9. Sus abuelos (es/está) muertos.
10. (Soy/Estoy) acostado ahora.